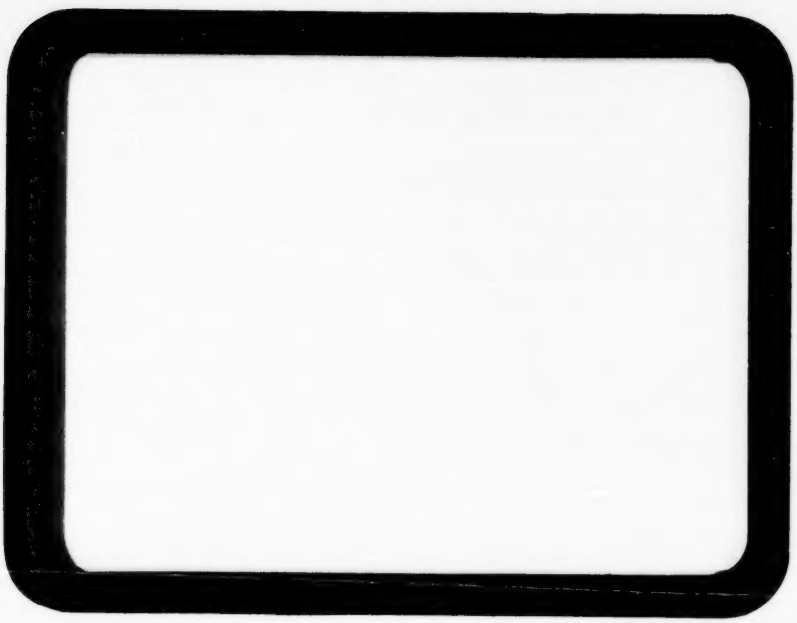


Province of British Columbia
Ministry of Forests

189(1)INF 82/6

A DISCUSSION PAPER ON

WILDLAND/URBAN INTERFACE FIRE HAZARDS

IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Prepared by:

The Protection Branch

B.C. Forest Service

Ministry of Forests and Lands

January 1988

Glossary:

Wildland/urban interface areas: where forested lands adjoin urban developments.

Slash: debris of branches, tops, etc. left on the ground following timber harvesting, land clearing, or timber processing operation.

Timber marks: persons engaged in cutting and removing timber must get from the B.C. Forest Service a registered timber mark before cutting any tree. Before the timber is transported from the area, it has to clearly display the timber mark to distinguish its origin so that the different classes of tenure, royalty, tax or exportability can be assessed.

Background:

The Protection Branch of the B.C. Forest Service (BCFS) is now developing a more comprehensive strategy for dealing with the wildland/urban interface fire problem.

Although this problem involves many issues, this discussion paper specifically addresses only slash-hazard identification, hazard abatement, and hazard prevention in the wildland/urban interface area.

The Forest Act (Section 117) gives the BCFS authority to direct landowners to dispose of slash hazards on their lands. If this is not done satisfactorily, the BCFS has the authority under the Act (Section 119) to dispose off the hazard and bill the landowner for all costs incurred.

Slash, created by private landowners through logging, land-clearing and homesite/subdivision development, has a major impact on the ministry's ability to meet its fire-control responsibilities.

Many of these landowners do not practice fuel management to the same extent as most industrial operators. Thus, slash in interface areas create fire hazards that threaten lives, property and forest values.

As urban expansion moves further into wildlands, the interface problems grow.

Our province has recorded an increase in these types of fires, as witnessed in Canal Flats and North Bend in 1985, and Cedar, Penticton, Kaleden and Saanich in 1987.

Through this discussion paper, the Protection Branch wishes to get the views of government agencies, private landowners and other interested parties in order to develop a strategy to minimize the threat of interface wildfires.

Discussion:

1. Hazard indentification:

The BCFS now uses three main techniques to identify slash hazards. They are:

- o Ground reconnaisance;
- o Aerial reconnaisance; and,
- o Scale and royalty return.

While these methods are suitable for identifying slash hazards from large industrial operations, they do not adequately deal with slash hazards created by small logging/clearing operations or subdivision/homesite developments.

To improve hazard identification, a number of possible solutions are being evaluated:

- o Modifying the requirement that timber-mark holders advise the B.C. Forest Service ahead of time on when logging will take place and what will be the final use of the property;

- o The BCFS will become involved, via a referral system, in all subdivisions or similar developments. The referrals would be from the other agencies which now review such

developments, such as the Ministry of Transportation and Highways, municipalities and regional districts; and,

- o The BCFS could turn over the identification of slash hazards in interface areas to the agencies mentioned above through agreements and training.

We recognize that more than one identification mechanism is needed in interface areas because slash hazards are created in a variety of situations and circumstances.

2. Abatement of fire hazard areas:

A hazard-ranking system is needed to help in priorizing interface hazards after they have been identified.

Each identified area will be addressed within a forest district's operational fire-management planning system to ensure adequate planning and strategies are in place to minimize the risk to adjacent values.

A simple process is sought along the lines of the National Fire Protection Association's ranking system.

The hazard will be removed through discussions and a 'notice of order' to the landowner. Failure to meet the 'notice of order' requirements will nessitate:

- o Prosecution under the Forest Act; and
- o Cleanup of the area by BCFS at cost to the landowner (see Appendix 1 - Flow Chart).

Early pro-active involvement at the planning stage will help reduce the cleanup cost, make the area less hazardous during the clearing/logging stage, and reduce the need for prosecutions.

3. **Hazard prevention:**

Hazard prevention is, perhaps, the best solution in identifying and abating slash in interface areas.

Hazards could be minimized by aggressively implementing a broad-based public awareness and information campaign.

Such a program will be particularly useful in helping private landowners become more aware of their responsibilities in slash hazard abatement.

Other benefits would be:

- Lower fire-suppression costs to British Columbians;
- A reduction in the BCFS's involvement in wildland/urban interface fires;
- A clarification of the roles and responsibilities of all involved;
- Improved protection of life and property;
- A reduction in the loss and damage from interface wildfires.

A hazard prevention program could consist of:

- o News releases from the ministry;
- o Articles and advertisements in the media;
- o Promotion of meetings, at the regional and local levels, of key agencies and concerned citizens;
- o The establishment of wildland/urban interface fire protection organizations at local forest district levels; and,
- o Co-operative programs with municipalities, regional districts and fire protection districts for the education of private landowners.

BCFS expenditures to implement such public awareness programs will increase by approximately $50,000 per year. A reduction of the number, size and cost of interface fires will result in major savings in fire suppression costs. No estimate of this is made.

Summary:

While urban and municipal fire departments are responsible for prevention/suppression of structural fires, the BCFS is recognized as the lead agency for the prevention/suppression of wildland fires.

A failure to develop a pro-active position of preventing as well as suppressing wildland/urban interface fires could ultimately result in increased problems.

The BCFS wants to improve its method of identifying and dealing with fire hazards created within the wildland/urban interface area. It is proposed to initiate changes as soon as possible.

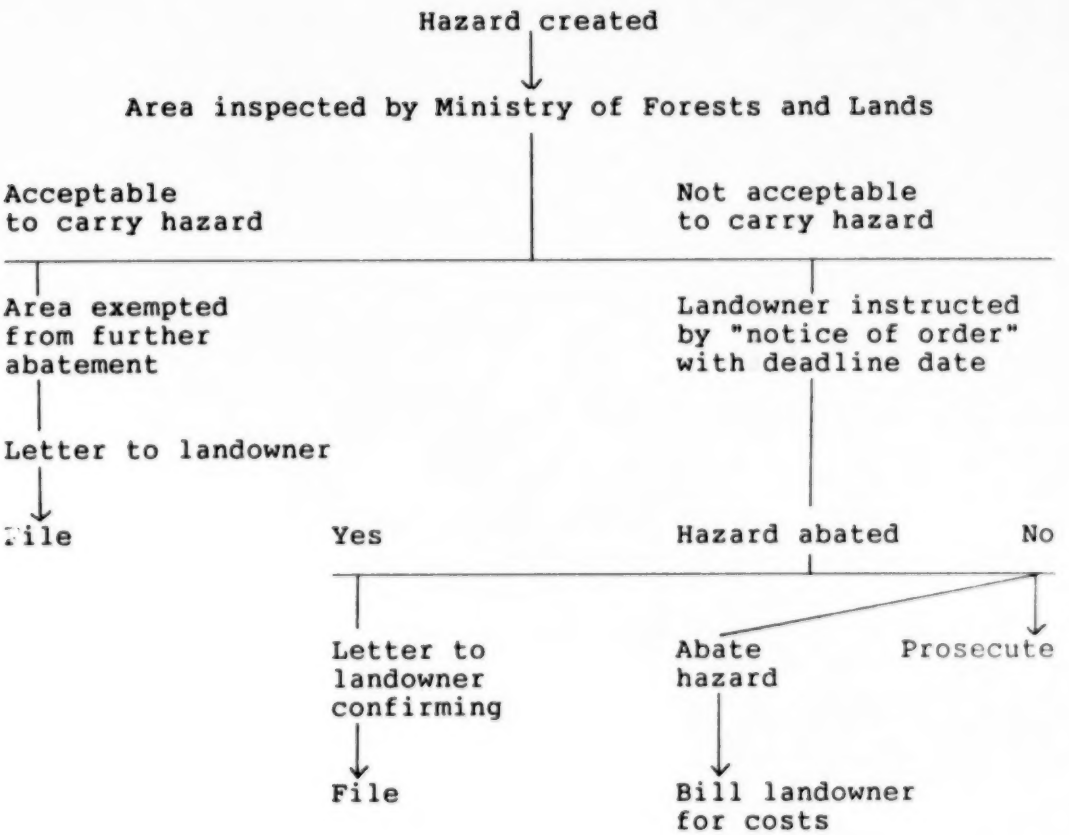
Written submissions from interested individuals, corporations, or other government agencies are requested before February 15, 1988, to:

Director
Forest Protection Branch
Ministry of Forests and Lands
31 Bastion Square
Victoria, B.C. V8W 3E7

For more information, contact your local forest district manager or:

Colin Effa
Superintendent, Fire Preparedness
Protection Branch
Victoria, B.C.
Phone: 387-5965

APPENDIX I


Hazard created
Area inspected by Ministry of Forests and Lands
Acceptable to carry hazard
Not acceptable to carry hazard
Area exempted from further abatement
Landowner instructed by "notice of order" with deadline date
Letter to landowner
File
Yes
Hazard abated
No
Letter to landowner confirming
File
Abate hazard
Prosecute
Bill landowner for costs